

## SHAMDEV: THE WOLF-BOY

Last Easter Saturday, Father Joseph de Souza put on a freshly-laundered soutane and took the bus from Sultanpur to Lucknow, to celebrate Mass in the Cathedral. With him went an eight- or nine-year-old boy whom he was taking to Mother Teresa's Mission of Charity. The boy was unable to speak. Instead, he would clench his fists against his neck, depressing his vocal chords to make a low muted noise halfway between a growl and a howl.

Along the road the bus passed through the forest of Musafirkhana, where, about four years earlier, the boy had been found at play with his foster-brothers — who, it was said, were wolf-cubs.

From Romulus and Remus to Mowgli in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, there have been stories of man-cubs being saved and suckled by wolves: as well as by pigs, sheep, leopards, bears and, recently in the Sahara, by gazelles. No single case has been proved beyond doubt. It is conceivable that Pascal — the name bestowed on the new arrival by the mission Sisters — will turn out to be the exception.

Pascal immediately befriended the orphanage dog — although, one day, he took its ear in his mouth and bit hard. During the first week, he would rip off his clothes, chuck away his food, and when he got hold of a pair of glasses, he clashed them together like cymbals. During the second

week, he began to settle down. He learned to greet people with the Hindi salutation 'Namaste!' He liked to travel round the garden sitting upright in the back of a bicycle rickshaw. The Sisters did have to watch him with other children: for sometimes, without warning, he would flick his fingers into their eyes.

One morning, a troupe of Rajasthani entertainers came down the street with monkeys jingling their bells, and a bear on a chain. Someone held up Pascal so he could get a better look – and he, as if suddenly seized with a fit, struggled and tried to throw himself into the bear's arms. A mission-worker, having watched this behaviour, decided to rename Pascal 'Baloo' – like Baloo the Bear in *The Jungle Book* – and wrote a short article about him for one of the Lucknow papers.

The article was syndicated in the foreign press. I was in Benares when I heard of it: I took the train to Sultanpur and looked up Father Joseph, who teaches at a school run by the Sisters of the Little Flowers of Bethlehem. He is a small, wrinkled, optimistic South Indian who has spent forty of his sixty-nine years in the Hindi north. In the hot weather he sleeps alone on the roof of a barrack-like building, at the far end of the compound from the nuns. In the yard below there grew some leggy papayas. A kennel housed a ferocious Alsatian that yanked at its chain, howled, and bared its teeth as I passed. Father Joseph's colleague, Sister Clarice, then gave a tea-party in my honour at which she and two other nuns told their version of Pascal's story.

Early in Easter week a Muslim woman came to the school with news that an 'animal-child' was roaming the western part of the town, scavenging for scraps. The Sisters found him on Good Friday, filthy and abandoned, crouching in a niche in the wall of a mudbrick house. The owners of the house said that a laundrywoman had come to claim him a few days earlier.

'But she didn't want him back,' Father Joseph interrupted,

'seeing he's come from the jungle and all. That's what it is. Once a baby's been touched by an animal, they abandon him and all.'

Father Joseph said that, in the course of his ministry, he had often heard stories of 'wolf-children', but had never set eyes on one. He knew of one case where a mother had lost her child at nightfall, and returned to find a female wolf guarding it.

The Sisters succeeded in tying up the boy and taking him back to the school. When they bathed him, he bit them. He spat out some Cadbury's chocolate. They gave him dal and chapaties, but 'he threw the plate and all'; and when he heard the Alsatian barking, he rushed towards the kennel and tried to get inside. The Alsatian suddenly went quiet. They then put the boy to bed and locked the room.

'I heard him growling in the night and all,' said the old priest – and the morning had found him hunched against the door.

My train got to Sultanpur in the late afternoon. By a lucky coincidence, only a few hours earlier the Sisters had received a visit from the man who originally 'rescued' the boy in the forest. His name was Narsing Bahadur Singh and he was the *thakur*, or headman, of the village of Narangpur, about three miles outside the town.

The thakur owned a food-stall near the railway repair-yards and would often take along his wolf-boy, whom he called Shamdev. He said that Shamdev was always getting lost, or running after pariah-dogs, but usually had the knack of finding his way home. When Sister Clarice taxed him with a rumour she had heard: that he used to exhibit the boy in a booth, for money – he was extremely indignant and went away.

In the evening she and I took a rickshaw to Narangpur. The thakur was still at market, so we sat in his courtyard while a crowd of villagers entertained us with imitations of Shamdev's antics, growling and baring their teeth. Narsing

Bahadur Singh, when he did appear, was an erect, mild-mannered man in his fifties, dressed in white hand-woven khaki cloth, and with a striped towel draped over his shoulders. He owned six acres of land, planted corn, dal and rice, and was accounted rich. He had, it turned out, a history of adopting stray children. Besides his own two sons, he had brought up four other boys found abandoned in the wild. One of these, a gawky adolescent called Ramdev, was bundling straw into a loft. The thakur was insistent on one point: Ramdev was a mad boy; Shamdev was *not* mad, he was a 'wolf-boy'.

With the help of Sister Clarice's translation, I pieced together an outline of the story: It had happened early one morning about five years ago. It was the dry season but he couldn't be sure what month. He had bicycled to see his cousin, who lived in a village on the far side of Musafirkhana forest, about twenty miles from Sultanpur. On his way back to the main trunk road, the track cut through thickets of bamboo and thornbushes and, behind one of these, he heard the noise of squealing. He crept up and saw the boy at play with four or five wolf-cubs. He was most emphatic that they were not dogs or jackals, but wolves.

The boy had very dark skin, fingernails grown into claws, a tangle of matted hair and callouses on his palms, his elbows and knees. Some of his teeth were broken to sharp points. He ran rapidly on all fours, yet couldn't keep up with the cubs as they bolted for cover. The mother wolf was not in sight. The thakur caught up with the boy, and was bitten on the hand. He did, however, succeed in trussing him up in his towel, lashed him to the pillion of his bicycle, and rode home.

At first Shamdev cowered from people and would only play with dogs. He hated the sun and liked to curl up in shadowy places. After dark, he grew restless and they had to tie him up to stop him following the jackals that howled around the village at night. If anyone cut themselves, he immediately smelled the scent of blood, and would scamper towards it. He

caught chickens and ate them alive, including the entrails. Later, when he had evolved a sign language of his own, he would cross his thumbs and flap his hands: this meant 'chicken' or 'food'.

Eventually the thakur decided to wean him off red meat. He force-fed him with rice, dal and chapaties, but these made him sick. He took to eating earth, his chest swelled up and they began to fear for his life. Only gradually did he get used to the new diet. After five months he began to stand: two years later he was doing odd jobs, like taking straw to the cows.

'He's mine,' said Narsing Bahadur Singh, angrily. 'I want him back. I will go to Lucknow to fetch him.'  
'I'll take you,' I said.

At six the next morning he was waiting for the taxi, all dressed up in spotless whites. As the taxi passed through the forest at Musafirkhana he pointed to the track, but we couldn't go and see the place because the driver was in a hurry and threatened to dump us and return to Sultanpur.

There were at least a hundred mentally defective children at the Mother Teresa Mission. We were greeted there by an elderly man, Ananda Ralla Ram, who had been a barrister before devoting himself to charity. He turned his legal mind onto the subject of Shamdev and gave the thakur quite a grilling. We tried to explore the story from every angle, in an effort to find a flaw or contradiction. The thakur's answers were always consistent.

When the Sisters brought in the boy, he stood tottering in the doorway, screwing up his eyes to see who it was. Then, recognising his old friend, he jumped into the air, flung himself around his neck, and grinned.

I watched him for about two hours. Nothing much happened. He cuffed a child; he made his growling noises; he made the sign for 'chicken'; sometimes he would point to the sky, circling his index finger as if describing the sun or moon. The callouses had gone, but you could see the scar tissue on his knees. He also had scars on the sides of his head: these,

according to the thakur, had been made by the wolf-mother when she picked him up with her teeth.

The thakur left the Mission with me. He had been gearing himself for a scene; but the firm smiles of the Sisters unnerved him. He asked, meekly, if he could come again. He seemed very upset when it was time to say goodbye. So was Shamdev, and they hugged one another.

The discovery of an authentic wolf-child would be of immense importance to students of human and animal behaviour. But though I felt that Narsing Bahadur Singh was speaking the truth, it was a very different matter to prove it.

The best-documented account of Indian wolf-children is that of Kamala and Amala, who, in 1920, were dug out of a wolf lair in Orissa by the Reverend J.A.L. Singh. The younger girl, Amala, died – although her ‘sister’ lived on for nine years at the orphanage of Midnapore, during which time Singh kept a diary of her adjustment to human life.

Extracts from the diary have recently been republished in a book called *The Wolf Children* by Charles Maclean. On reading through it, I kept being struck by parallels between the girls and Shamdev: their sharpened teeth, their callouses, the craving for blood, the earth-eating, chicken-killing, the love of darkness and their friendship with dogs and jackals. Maclean, however, concluded that the Reverend Singh’s story is shot with inconsistencies – and that it does not hang together.

Another investigator, Professor Robert Zingg, collected in his *Wolf Children and Feral Man* all the known texts relating to children reared by animals, as well as stories of ‘The Wild Boy of Aveyron and the legendary Kaspar Hauser. As for Shamdev, by far the most interesting comparisons are to be made with the reports in Major-General Sir W.H. Skinner’s *A Journey through the Kingdom of Oudh (1849–50)*: five of his six cases of wolf-children come from the region of Sultanpur. He writes:

Zoolfikur Khan, a respectable landowner from Bankeepoor in the estate of Hassanpoor, 10 miles from the Sultanpoor cantonments, mentions that about eight or nine years ago a trooper came to town with a lad of about 9 or 10 years of age whom he had rescued from wolves among the ravines of the road . . . that he walked on his legs like other people when he saw him, though there were evident signs on his knees and elbows of having gone very long on all fours . . . He could not talk or utter any very articulate sound . . . he understood signs and understood exceedingly well and would assist the cultivators in turning trespassing cattle out of their fields . . .

His story could be that of Shamdev.

During the nineteenth century, when such tales were commoner, the most famous ‘wolf-man’ in India was Dina Sanichar, who lived at the Sicandra Orphanage in Agra from 1867 till his death in 1895. He probably gave Kipling the model for Mowgli. He, too, had a craving for raw meat and, when forced to give it up, would sharpen his teeth on stones.

In zoological terms, there are almost insuperable difficulties in the way of a female Indian wolf actually being able to rear a human baby. First, she would have to lose her own brood: to keep her milk, and to be on the lookout for a substitute cub. She would have to scent the baby but, instead of making a meal of it, allow its cries to stifle her hunger-drives and signal to her maternal instincts. Finally, since a wolf-cub’s period of dependence is so much shorter than a human infant’s, she might have three litters of her own before her adopted child could fend for itself. She would also have to protect it and post ‘Keep off!’ signals to other wolves whose hunger might get the better of them.

One alternative explanation is that the wolf-boys or girls are autistic children, abandoned by their parents once they realise their condition; who somehow survive in the forest and, when rescued, seem to *behave* like wolves. Or could it be that the

wolves around Sultanpur have a natural affiliation with man? There are no absolute conclusions to be drawn. But I came away convinced that Shamdev's story was as convincing as any other. Someone should get to the bottom of it.

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